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## Egypt's swinging center

**To understand the post-Mubarak era, it is crucial to consider the significance of the swinging center.**

Ellen Lust

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The rhetoric is eerily similar to that in neighbouring Syria, and equally misleading. It is a major mistake to assume that Islamists can be written off Egypt's political scene, just as it was equally mistaken to assume that secularists were a negligible force in Egyptian politics.

The political deadlock gripping Egypt since former President Mohamed Morsi was removed from power attests to these facts. The Muslim Brothers are resiliently resisting the ouster of Morsi, while their opponents are equally set on cementing the Brotherhood's political exclusion. The result is an upsurge in shooting and killing, typical in recent days of protests and mirrored by an uptick of Islamic terrorism in Sinai that, while closely linked to the current crisis, nevertheless, has life of its own.

The debates are intense, but they do not represent the aspirations of most Egyptians. Most Egyptians simply want a good, secure life. Polls conducted by the Danish Egyptian Dialogue Institute and the Al-Ahram Centre for Political Studies find that more than 70 percent of Egyptians believe the most critical issues facing Egypt today are economic - unemployment, inflation and social inequality.

While the vast majority, 70 percent of those polled, support democracy, they equate it with narrowing the income gap between rich and poor, or providing basic necessities to all citizens.

They are much more interested in feeding their children than they are in whether Sharia forms the basis of law.

The Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist Nour Party swept the 2011 parliamentary elections because Egyptians thought they could deliver a better life, not because they demanded an Islamist state. DEDI-ACPSS surveys consistently show that only 24 percent of Egyptians are strongly Islamist (defined as desiring a strong role for religion in the workings of state) and about 20 percent are strongly secularist (preferring a separation of religion and state). Most Egyptians' own preferences lie in the centre.

The post-Mubarak era is best understood in terms of the changing relationship between Islamists, secularists, and the swinging centre. The broad national coalition that brought down the Mubarak regime began to disintegrate immediately after his ouster, when the ideological conflict between Islamists and secularists re-emerged, each seeking to institute their own encompassing vision for the nation through legitimate channels of power.

At first, Islamists carried the day because they had organisational unity and the ability to mobilise vast swathes of the population. They contrasted sharply with fragmented secularist parties which held small political bases based in urban areas, primarily in Cairo. Our polls show that 47 percent of Egyptians in Cairo voted for non-Islamists compared to only 20 percent in rural areas.

But the tables turned. The alliance between the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and Nour Party began falling apart, just as the secularists were regrouping. The formation of the National Salvation Front (NSF) in response to President Morsi's extra-constitutional declaration of November 2012 was a turning point of the balance of power between the two blocks, and it ultimately led to mass protest of June 30 that granted the military the opportunity to ouster then President Mohamed Morsi.

It is a mistake to think that President Morsi's removal can usher in defeat of political Islam (or even just the Muslim Brotherhood), just as it was the Muslim Brotherhood's mistake to see their parliamentary and presidential victories as secularism's demise. As recently as the autumn of 2012, our polls found that conservative parties enjoy the support of committed loyal voters in rural areas and among the poorer segments of the population, and it is not clear whether their organizational capacity or popular support has disappeared.

Moreover, a great many of Egyptians who took to the streets on June 30 - just as those who did so in 2011 - were not driven by grand visions of a secularist or Islamist state. They were driven by anger over Morsi's failure to deliver on his promises and the continued economic stagnation, deteriorating security, and ever-narrowing political coalition.

This is what drove the swinging centre to side with secularist opposition to bring down the Morsi regime, making the mostly urban, middle class, secular opposition into a power to be reckoned with.

The military seemed the saviour. Since the modern Egyptian state was first established early in the nineteenth century, the military evolved into the most trusted institution in the country, with both ACPSS-DEDI and Zogby polls showing over 90 percent of the population has confidence in the military, a support that trumps any other Egyptian institution.

Historically, the military has been the bastion of Egyptian nationalism, a notion that defies even the strong supra-national nature of Islamism. And, of course, it abhors widespread unrest and political instability that threaten the state and their economic interests.

But Morsi's overthrow and the military's return to the centre stage of Egyptian politics was not a secularist victory as much as it a nationalist one. Together, the military and the people removed Morsi from power, just as they had Mubarak before him, because he failed to deliver. Most supporting these ousters yearn for economic and political stability, state integrity, and a decent life.

This has important implications moving forward. Ideologues on both sides claim the majority's support and try to push their agenda forward. But this confidence is misplaced, and their support base fragile. Winning and maintaining the support of people beyond their narrow ideological constituency depends upon delivering on the real issues that matter to Egyptians, and bringing the prospects of growth and stability. As Morsi's experience shows, even fragmented and disorganized opponents can defeat a strong, dedicated movement when it fails to meet people's needs.

Of course, the heightened frustration over deteriorating conditions, the political deadlock and Sinai terrorism make Egyptians impatient, willing to do almost anything to end the crisis. The planned Friday protest will renew public support for the military, and granting the latter the popular mandate needed to step up repression. This could take Egypt's political crisis to a new phase, but is not likely to solve it.

Stability, effective governance, and meeting the expectations of people can only be achieved through compromise from all sides, including the Muslim Brotherhood. It cannot be done through exclusion, proclamations of victory or turns to violence. Neither side is strong enough to defeat the other. Moreover, when they attempt to do so, they cause economic deterioration and instability that causes Egyptians to turn on them.

Moving forward in Egypt thus requires bridging the gap between ideological factions and help the people in power and the opposition to make the right choices. This requires political prudence that allows rivals to go beyond the confines of the current political moment to consult the enduring realities and the long term trends that will survive any particular moment in the conflict.

This also requires firm guidance and warnings from external actors in the West and the Gulf. As violence and repression escalate, outside actors must advise and provide real incentives to the military, its allies, and its opposition to seek negotiation and refrain from escalation. This is Egypt's only hope.